

Finding Home by EmmyFin

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Summary: The months leading up to Eleven's first year of high school. First chapter is from Hopper's perspective.

Finding Home

August 22nd 1985

Hopper feels nervous. His hands are dirty, his jeans are torn and splattered in a pale pink paint. He's tired and his muscles ach from exertion. Hopefully, it will all be worth it when he takes El to their new home first thing in the morning. He's spent long evenings for the past two months sanding the walls, priming and then finally painting them.

He didn't make much money selling his one bedroom home, so the only family sized home he could afford was a bit of a fixer upper. He hadn't told El yet, he wanted it to be a surprise. Her own room, decorated with refurbished furniture, all of which he'd carefully painted in varying shades of pink and purple. He assumed she would like it. Girls liked those colours right? He hadn't told El they were moving yet. Hopper spent most of July and August "working late" at the station. In reality he had been making trips to Home Depot and local thrift shops. He'd been sanding, sawing and hammering his way to their first home as a family. After all, she needed a real home address for her first day of high school. It couldn't be "the cabin in the woods". Their current residence didn't officially exist, which was preferable to Hopper.

After the events of last year Hopper had re-evaluated his house rules. He knew she had at least another year of house arrest on her hands and she wasn't happy about it. He felt that these new rules were more fitting and much more reasonable. He thought of them as a strong wall that protected them from the dangers he knew still lurked. A big wall, made of brick and asphalt. Hopper chuckled as he remembered how quickly El had turned his walls to sand that he could still feel slowly slipping from his fingers.

In the beginning, Hopper had been very strict about his rules:

1. No going out in daylight
2. No friends past 8

3. No radio communication

"I'm safe. No more bad people!"

"But you don't know that, kid. It's only been two months." Hopper sighed. He was getting used to this conversation. It felt scripted at this point. It was January now and the boys were heading back to school. She had grown used to late nights in the cabin. They would take their bikes or Joyce would drop them off. Now she was alone again and the first big sleepover after the new year was happening at the Wheelers. No way was she going to spend the night in the suburbs.

"I'm strong. I'm safe. Just one Sleepover. Please." El said, glaring at Hopper beneath her curls.

"I know that your strong. I know that better than anyone. Come on El, the bad people know what you're capable of. They will be ready for you. I don't want you sleeping at the Wheelers. They'll ask too many questions. I know for a fact they have a number for the agency. If the Wheelers figure out you're there, they could call them." Hopper argued.

"Cape a bull...?" El asked

"They know what you can do." Hopper said in a tired voice. "Besides, it's not you I'm worried about. What about Mike? What about his family? He's not as indestructible as you. They'll hurt him to hurt you."

This was the first time El had considered Mike getting hurt. She was usually at the centre of trouble. She felt bad for not having thought of it before. "I can keep them safe too!" She stated confidently.

"Dustin, Lucas, and Will too?" Hopper demanded. He knew he had her at this point, her shoulders had slumped in defeat. He decided to drive it home. "You know that you can't keep them all safe. They are in danger when you are with them. You understand?" El nodded with tears in her eyes.

"Just give it a year." Hopper pleaded. He was already starting to feel

guilty for her watery eyes. He avoided eye contact. Instead looking at the beer in his hand. After a painfully long silence he finally said. "Maybe..." He sighed. "Maybe they can come over here... for just ONE sleepover"

El looked up in disbelief at Hopper, who had his hand on his forehead, as if he were already nursing a headache. "Promise!?"

"Yeah, yeah kid."

Then the rules became:

1. No going out in daylight
2. No friends past 8 (Except for very important sleepovers)
3. No radio communication

"Phone again Hop!" Shouted his receptionist.

"Jim Hopper here." Said Hop into the receiver

"What is L-I-N-C-O-L-N?" Asked El on the other end

"Dammit El! You can't keep calling me every ten minutes with another word!" whispered Hop urgently.

El had been working on workbooks for about a year now. At first it was just a math book and the odd piece of fiction. She flew through the math books, nearly catching up with kids her age. Hopper imagined by September she would be functioning at a grade 9 level just like the boys. Maybe not just like them. They were a bunch of nerds after all. Her reading had also been improving, so Hop thought she could start some more complex reading. He borrowed some American and world History books from the library. This proved to be a mistake. Most names and places were completely foreign to her. She called him dozens of times a day to ask simple and annoying questions. He was worried his receptionist would start asking why a 13 year old girl was calling him every day. He had a plan for how he was going to introduce her and she was jeopardizing that.

The voice on the other end was quiet for a moment. "Who can I call?"

Then the rules became:

1. No going out in daylight
2. No friends past 8 (Except for very important sleepovers)
3. No radio communication (Except when your homework requires it)

The Chief was coming home from a particularly long day when he found the usual troop of boys walking along the gravel road to his home. The sun was just setting and he didn't pay much mind to them. He normally would have offered them a ride the rest of the way, but they were all walking their bikes. He didn't have the energy to haul them into the back of his truck. So instead, he just gave them a nod as he drove by.

"Hey El." He said as he entered the cabin.

She was sitting facing the television watching one of her stories. She barely registered him coming in. They didn't have so intricate of a locking system anymore. Hopper was slowly letting his guard down and she could feel it. September couldn't come soon enough.

Hopper opened the beer and sat next to her. She still hadn't responded to his first comment. "I had a good day by the way. How about yourself?"

Silence.

"Did you eat dinner already?"

Still nothing.

"I saw the Wheeler kid on the way here. He's got the rest of the pack with him too."

With that El flew off the couch and to the front door. The boys were just walking up the path.

"Can I?" she asked while balancing on the balls of her feet, poised as if she could take flight any moment.

"Sure" Was all Hop said while reaching for the television. He'd have to turn it up if he were going to drown out their visit. He heard the door shut behind her and the creaking of the wooden steps as she bounded down them. He heard the chorus greeting and turned the volume up higher.

Hopper heard a shriek over the sound of the television. He was out the door and down the stairs within five seconds. He surveyed the scene, looking over El and the boys to make sure they were safe. He relaxed when he saw it was a look of glee on her face instead of one of terror as he had suspected. He tensed again however when he saw what had made her so giddy. She was seated on top of a shiny red bike with a blue bow on the handle bars. Mike had a smug look on his face that Hopper was very willing to smack off. Of all of the bonehead things Mike could have done!

"Hop!" cried El. "Look what Mike got me!"

"Well." Said Mike sheepishly. "I wasn't just me. We've all been saving up for this for months." We figured it's about time you had your own! That way this summer we can get everywhere much faster, and this fall you can bike with us to school."

"Now wait just a minute." Said Hop, trying (and failing) to control his simmering anger. "Where is it you think you will be needing to get to this summer?"

"Oh you know! The quarry, the lake, and the arcade!" Said Dustin enthusiastically.

"Don't forget about the pool!" Lucas chimed in.

"No way, man. The pool is too crowded. The lake is easily ten times better than the pool." Argued Dustin.

"Forget about all of it." Hopper interrupted. "We've been pushing it these past few months by letting El visit at the Byers and I've even been allowing radio communication during school hours."

"You have!?" Asked Dustin. All of the boys glanced at El and then Mike.

Mikes cheeks turned pink. "Well," he started.

"Yes!" Chimed in El. "Mike calls every day. At one, one, five."

"El" Mike groans "That was supposed to be a secret"

"Is that what you've been doing every day during study hall!?" accused Lucas "You told us you were getting tutored by Mrs. Jacobson."

"Should have known you weren't falling behind in Bio" said Dustin

"You could have told me" said Will in a small voice. There was not anger in his voice. There was however just enough sadness to make Mike feel ashamed.

"I'm sorry. It's just...well..." said Mike "I never really get any alone time with El. We're always hanging out here together. I just liked to have this time to myself. Besides, it's not like it was this super fun time. I just help her with History and stuff. You know to get her ready for school."

"Not fun?" Asked El, looking up at Mike.

"El! That's not what I..."

"Enough!" Roared Hop. "This all goes to say, that I think we've been pushing our luck. We don't need to push it any farther. September is only two months away. I think it's best if we just.."

"Only two months." Interrupted El. "It's only two months. I am safe for seven months. No bad men. No one knows me. I will be safe for only two more months. Please Hop."

Dustin chuckled at his nickname. "Yeah, please Hop!"

"Please Hop!" chimed in the rest of the boys. All but Mike joining.

Instead Mike looked Hopper dead in the eye, with the most serious gaze he could muster. Hop looked at him and then down to El. He could see there was almost no point in arguing. He was getting tired of keeping her prisoner, but he was so scared to let her go. He sighed.

At that they all knew they had won. They all cheered as the mounted their bikes and started back down the trail. El got off hers to walk to the big man. She wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Thank you." She whispered. "I will be safe. I promise."

He watched her jump on her bike and pedal off after the boys. She wobbled a bit before finding her balance. Hopper suspected this was not her first solo ride. As she got farther away he felt a stretching in his chest. It felt like a rubber band getting tighter and tighter. As she rounded the corner he felt the snap. She was out of his hands now. The feeling made him ache. This was a good thing he reminded himself. He sighed and turned around.

Hopper reflected on this as he took the long winding road to the cabin. He sure was glad he wasn't going to have to make this commute every day.

Hopper spent many years going through the motions. He didn't live for much and being a small town cop didn't offer many distractions. He wasn't motivated enough to do anything about it. In the year and a half he's been living with El, colour had been slowly seeping back into his world. He felt like his life had meaning again.

He was particularly proud of this house. He had put so much time and effort into it to make it perfect for her. The house was in a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. Close enough to walk to the high-school, and just a short drive to the station. Even close enough to her friends because God knows he will have to account for them.

He finally arrives at the end of the narrow path, pulls his truck under a low hanging tree and gets out. The sun is rapidly descending, sending bursts of pink and orange rays through the trees. Part of him will miss it here and part of him knows it's time to move on. He is so distracted by his own thoughts he doesn't notice the old battered bike sitting next to El's shiny new one.

As Hopper opens the door the two teenagers kissing shyly behind it lurch apart. Hopper looks up in time to see Mike Wheeler trip backwards over his own goddamn feet. He looks down at the boy for

a full 10 seconds before turning his eyes towards his daughter.

"Hi Hop!" Says Eleven, unleashing her most innocent expression on him.

"Hi Chief Hop. I mean Hopper. I m-m-mean Chief Hopper" stuttered Mike scrambling to his feet. "I was uh, just giving El this!" He holds up a brown backpack with two sturdy looking straps and a big front pouch. Hopper thought of the pink backpack waiting at their new home and had to admit that Mikes choice suited her more.

Hopper is too tired for this. Too tired to be angry at El for breaking the rules. Too tired to pick up the Wheeler boy and toss him out of his home. Too tired even to raise his voice. This terrified Mike even more than his rage. Hopper simply stepped to the side and gestured for Mike to leave.

"Right." Said Mike, managing to look only vaguely rejected. He stumbled out the door and looked over at El. She was peering around Hopper with wide eyes.

"Bye Mike." She managed to say before Hopper slammed the door in Mikes face.

Hopper turned to the girl standing behind him. He looked down on her and couldn't muster any anger. He could only feel that familiar stretching in his chest.

"Come sit down kid. I've got news."